

## Gujrat and the world order

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The events of 9/11 took place in New York and Washington, but their direct effect was felt in Asia in the form of a massive increase in US aggression in parts of the region. What does the military presence of the US mean for the future of democracy and civil order in the Indian subcontinent in the aftermath of 9/11?<sup>1</sup> Although the issue was raised before,<sup>2</sup> it did not get proper attention during the most brutal phase of America's war on Afghanistan. While rational opinion was temporarily shell-shocked with the events of 9/11, American military policy quickly took advantage of the confusion, and turned the carnage in New York as a fresh opportunity for aggression in the third world. In other words, as the complex and time-consuming issue of how to bring the perpetrators of 9/11 to justice in accordance with civil norms and international law engaged political thinking in the world, the US pre-empted any consolidation of world opinion by a massive attack on the entire nation on Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> It is now getting clear that the US presence has a variety of fallouts: direct and indirect. The most direct fallouts are unfolding in Afghanistan and Pakistan; India, especially Gujrat, illustrates an indirect fallout.

### **Afghanistan**

Note that the entire top order of Al-Queda and Taliban have disappeared somewhere despite (a) three months of continuous bombing, (b) complete support from the local anti-Taliban militias who should know where to find whom in their own country, (c) unconditional surrender and capture of a large number of middle to lower level soldiers of the Taliban and Al-Queda, and (d) unhindered access to every nook and corner of this devastated land. On a charitable inference, the loud proclamations of bringing them 'dead or alive' could only have been based on wishful thinking. Yet, with the complicity of the most of the civilised world, an entire nation was massacred on this basis.<sup>4</sup> Uncharitable inferences have to await the future.

What has the US achieved so far in that war? The US now has an administrative machinery in Afghanistan in the form of the Hamid Karzai government, designed and propped up from Washington. US and British military have free access to the strategic locations ostensibly to search for the fugitives. Since the fugitives have vanished, this gives the US the excuse to permanently control the land to (a) facilitate the operations for oil and natural gas, and (b) oversee the unfolding of events in the entire stretch from central Asia to the Indian ocean.

The Hamid Karzai government, by itself, is unsustainable in the form in which the US wants it to continue. The fiercely independent psyche of the Afghan people had been under continuous and massive assault from foreign occupation for over two decades. Given the partial release of

democratic forces in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, there is every chance that the virtual occupation of the country by the US will turn into a rallying ground for a united anti-imperialist movement. With the familiar warlords inching for more power and the remnants of Taliban still pulsating in the countryside, the attention of the democratic people is understandably focused on these forces.<sup>5</sup> If the future of Afghanistan were to be left to its people, it is a matter of time before a truly independent democratic movement engulfs the nation, with the women of Afghanistan in the forefront. The US presence thus is needed to monitor the situation and to forestall any attempts in the direction of genuine democracy.<sup>6</sup>

## **Pakistan**

In fact, the benefits of the Afghan war stretch beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The excuse of flushing out the terrorists has enabled the US to directly infiltrate the military and political structures of Pakistan. A direct fallout of this presence is the growing authority and belligerence of the dictator General Musharraf. During his long stint as a military general, Musharraf was one of the chief architects of the Zia doctrine of promoting Islamic fundamentalism – i.e., training young boys from poor families in the use of grenades and Kalashnikovs to prepare them for suicide – for consolidating the geopolitical interests of the Pakistani ruling class represented by successive dictatorial regimes. He was also the prime mover of the disastrous Kargil war that was designed to uproot a rare elected regime.

His initial acts as a dictator included the banning of organised political activity and the refashioning of the judiciary. He staved off elections by three years, thus going beyond the standard dictatorial proclamations of postponing elections for six months to one year. In the meantime, he changed election rules, redefined legitimate political activity, and crowned himself as the President of Pakistan. After destroying the basic structures of democracy, he has just orchestrated a referendum to allow his rule even beyond an electoral process of his own design. Given the precedence of his predecessors like Ayub Khan and Zia-Ul-Haq, the nation is likely to be under military dictatorship for an indefinite period.

There is nothing new in all this insofar as the history of Pakistan or the standard history of dictators is concerned. What is new is the disarming face Musharraf is able to maintain post-9/11. As noted, Musharraf is the latest product of the fundamentalist-military regime that has ruled Pakistan for most of its tortuous history. Between the period of his annexation of power and the events of 9/11, popular resistance to his rule was perceptively growing, culminating in the impressive demonstration of the working masses against the IMF-World Bank team visiting Pakistan. A large number of civil rights groups were beginning to gather courage and were consolidating the process of united resistance to the military regime. Given growing international criticism of Pakistan's support to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the fundamentalist forces in Pakistan, Musharraf found himself increasingly isolated both at home and abroad.

9/11 changed all that. In one stroke, the US and its allies embraced the dictator to further their geopolitical aims in the region. Given the massive backing of US military and economic power, Musharraf and his erstwhile pro-jehadi generals lost no time in turning their backs on the jihadis to join the US bandwagon. Afghanistan was treated exactly as the US ordered: closure of borders resulting in the stoppage of food-aid to the starving people, opening Pakistani airbases to the US and Western military for attacks on the Afghan people, giving a free hand to American and British special forces to infiltrate both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In return, Musharraf was assured of increase in dole, renewal of arms contracts with US, and a general amnesty on the acts of brutalising the civil society during his reign. In fact, as noted, this very act of scuttling of democracy for over two years enabled the US and its allies to project Musharraf himself as the spokesman for democracy and civil order in Pakistan; Musharraf left no alternative. In sum, there is no doubt that Musharraf's current hold on power derives primarily from his recent anti-fundamentalist posture. But the price the entire nation had to pay for Musharraf's continuation in power is to turn Pakistan virtually into a client state.

### **India: Gujrat**

A somewhat less direct fallout of the US presence in the subcontinent – but a fallout, nonetheless – is currently playing out in India. The current NDA formation led by the fundamentalist BJP came back to power in 1999. It has lost virtually every regional and civic election since then, often by a wide margin. Its façade of clean governance stands exposed in a series of massive scams concerning defence and other contracts. Some of the non-fundamentalist parts of the electorate, who supported the BJP earlier on its claims of 'swadeshi', fely betrayed with the regime's record of surrender to global corporate interests. In fact, in its attempts to preserve the NDA, it failed even to deliver to its most loyal constituency, viz., the militant Hindu fundamentalists organised in the form of RSS, Bajrang Dal, Viswa Hindu Parishad, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad etc, collectively known as the Sangh Parivar. In frustration, these forces began taking actions, such as intimidating and often murdering people from the minority (Graham Steins case, nuns case, etc.) and issuing ultimatums on the Ayodhya issue. The resulting appeasement of these forces by the government exposed the diabolical character of the BJP even further. The election results clearly illustrate this array of exposures.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the regime was caught in a no-win situation. On the one hand, it began facing resistance from its own more ideologically adamant sections such as the Hind Majdoor Sabha (BMS) and Swadeshi Jagaran Manch for its capitulation to foreign capital. In an interesting parallel to the scenario in Pakistan, the growing discontent culminated in a series of impressive demonstrations by the working masses, including the BMS, just prior to 9/11. On the other, its meek attempts to revive its fundamentalist agenda by tampering with educational and cultural institutions met with strong resistance from virtually all sections of the society. As it was forced to fall back on some

populist measures – pushed primarily by its worried non-BJP allies – to regain some credibility, it began to lose the strong corporate support that was one of the key elements of its ascendancy to power. Its failure to push through the labour 'reforms', urged by the chambers of commerce and resisted by all trade unions including the BMS, illustrates its problems. In sum, by September 2001, nothing was working in its favour.

Not surprisingly, 9/11 gave the BJP the fresh lease it desperately needed. In the name of assisting the civilised world in its fight against terrorism, it could now side with the US military and economic interests with a straight face, and win back its corporate and media support. As a result, a scenario of US infiltration, very similar to that in Pakistan, is unfolding in India with the active cooperation of the government. By now, the FBI and the CIA have access to, and some control on, the most sensitive areas of the Indian security system. Indian and US joint military exercises and planning are now matters of daily routine. Reportedly, the 'ties' have grown to the point where representatives of US global interests, such as James Baker, actually seek Indian cooperation for a planned military and economic attack on Iraq.<sup>8</sup> The regime hastened to form close ties with Israel and its security apparatus ostensibly at the expense of India's long support to the Palestinian cause. It reactivated plans of massive disinvestment of public sector organizations, and allowed an unprecedented entry of multinationals in key sectors of the economy.

Having thus appeased the US and its neoliberal support in India, it could return to its basic communal-fundamentalist agenda in the name of assisting the civilized world. The sinister alliance of globalization, privatization and fundamentalism is a fact of history. As Roy puts it, 'the fundamentalism and the religious right-wingism that's going on is directly linked to globalization and to privatization. When India is talking about selling its entire power sector to foreign multinationals, when the political climate gets too hot and uncomfortable, the government will immediately start saying, Should we build the Ram temple in Ayodhya? Everyone will go baying off in that direction. It's a game.'<sup>9</sup> I said that the alliance is 'sinister'; Roy calls it a 'game'. What the US aggression and the accompanying propaganda machine enabled the Sangh Parivar to do is to claim not only moral legitimacy, but also some form of international solidarity against terrorism for its attacks on minorities, especially the Muslims. The perceived legitimacy arose as follows.

Despite the rhetoric and some gestures to the contrary (such as organizing Iftaar parties in the White House), the current form of the US attack on the rest of the world has a distinct anti-Islam content. This is not because the US global interests have anything to do with religion. As Vaskar Nandy pointed out,<sup>10</sup> this anti-Islam character emerges from two factors that coincide: (a) its current geo-political interests are concentrated largely in Muslim-dominated areas of the world, (b) it is likely to get the most organised resistance from this part of the world, as the events of 9/11 brutally illustrated.

A very careful strategy implemented over the decades in the entire region from the middle-east to Afghanistan is beginning to pay dividends. The strategy essentially consisted of weeding out

popular democratic forces in the region where oil, gas, and other vital resources abound. Thus, the US consistently propped up autocratic -- often fundamentalist -- regimes in the region such that democratic forces can be internally suppressed. Moreover, it used client states like Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (also Saddam Hussain's Iraq upto a certain point) not only to curb any anti-imperialist aspirations of their peoples, but also to directly intervene in the neighbouring states to foster US interests.

Decades of implementing this strategy, often with massive violence, as in Palestine and Afghanistan, has led, as Nandy observes, to a socio-political order in which secular, democratic forces can no longer form popular resistance. Ironically, therefore, any viable form of resistance to the US can only come from sections of the fundamentalists themselves, who have nurtured their own conception of dominating the world. In this sense, it is indisputable that the actions of US and its clients in the region are largely responsible for fuelling Islamic fundamentalism. Given the growing helplessness of mainstream Islam and the resulting visibility of the fundamentalist forces within it, the facile identification of Islam with terrorism has found a new acceptance in the world.

As a result, the military role of the US in the region has given a suitable platform to all forms of state power to act on what they perceive to be the terrorists as long as the powers themselves submit to US interests in the region. The most blatant form of this new understanding in the world is illustrated by the current actions of Israel in Palestine. However, a discussion of the form and content of current Israeli aggression falls outside the scope of this essay.

The newfound belligerence of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar to which it belongs must be understood in the light of these developments. By sheer unipolar power, the US has been able to propagate a view of the world in which fascist forces can now show their faces with impunity. By turning India into a state of unprecedented subservience to the US interests, the Sangh Parivar is now in a position to claim its pound of flesh. With the orchestrated carnage in Gujrat, the Parivar is merely playing out its role as the local bully.

The actions of the BJP-led government, ever since 9/11, fall into a coherent pattern under the view just sketched. First, almost immediately after 9/11, the waters were tested with the banning of an Islamic student organization, SIMI, and the arrest of its leaders for the alleged crime of displaying photographs of Osama bin Laden. When the nation was seen to swallow the move, a draconian 'anti-terrorist' ordinance, POTO, was swiftly promulgated after the events at Kashmir Assembly, and quite openly applied to sections of the muslim population. Next, the events of 13 December were used to take the nation almost to the brink of war with Pakistan. The combined effect of these moves was to create and sustain virtually a condition of internal emergency and divert all attention away from the defence scams, electoral defeats, surrender at WTO, and the like.<sup>11</sup> As with any local bully, the limits of the leash was sometimes stretched to the discomfort of the master. Thus, the US quickly disapproved the posture of war with Pakistan, and advocated regional peace; the order, needless to say, was immediately obeyed.<sup>12</sup>

By now, the attention of the nation was veered once again towards the Ayodhya issue as scores of militants of the Sangh Parivar were rallied, under obvious government protection, to raise the communal pitch. As the Supreme Court poured temporary water on the flames, the Godhra incident happened. From a series of reports furnished by a wide variety of organizations, it is clear by now that the carnage that followed the Godhra incident was carefully planned and funded much in advance; Godhra was just the trigger. If we have followed the pattern so far, especially the progressive increase in the scale of propaganda and violence, it follows that something like Gujrat (and the vicious aggression in Palestine) was always on the cards ever since the twin towers collapsed in New York.

However, the connections between the US actions in the emerging world order and the genocide in Gujrat (and in Palestine) can only be indirect. In fact, the US may not even want these things to happen, as these are likely to smudge the 'purity' of its current anti-terrorist campaign. Moreover, in sharp contrast to the scene in Palestine, Gujrat demonstrates not only the new-found belligerence of the Sangh Parivar post-9/11, but also some deeply disturbing face of the Indian society. The Sangh Parivar might have cherished the dismemberment of an entire population for long, but upto the eighties it had a miniscule share of the votes and only marginal presence in the parliament. The nineties have brought them not only to the center of national politics, they have been allowed to exercise unprecedented power. They have ruled in Gujrat for many years now; a party like the Shiv Sena ruled in the neighbouring Maharashtra for a full term only recently.

There is no doubt that even the carnage at Gujrat, if not the actual scale of brutality, enjoys latent support from wide sections of the urban, educated, opinion-making population. Otherwise it is difficult to explain the timid protests in the streets, and great interest in issues such as whether the Godhra carnage has been sufficiently condemned, whether parallels can be drawn with the genocide of Sikhs in 1984, and whether the expulsion of pundits from Kashmir has been largely ignored. The fact that these issues are even raised and debated while hundreds are burnt alive and hundreds of thousands are driven from their homes is a clear indication of the moral state of this section of the population. Bush and the Pentagon cannot be held responsible for this.

It is not West Asia or Pakistan as yet, but there are growing signs that secular, democratic opinion is losing ground. Alarmingly, it correlates rather firmly with other aspects of erosion of democracy in the country: failure of probity in public institutions, lack of mass movements, criminalization of elections, marginalisation of basic issues such as land reforms and employment, and the like.<sup>13</sup> Historically, this is fertile ground for growth in totalitarianism of the third world kind with the resulting loss of sovereignty.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Fahim Hussain, 'Yankee go home', *South Asian Citizen's Wire (SACW)* # 1, 8 April, 2002. See <http://www.mnet.fr/aiindex> for SACW articles.

<sup>2</sup> See my 'Offers of Peace', *SACW* #2, 17 October, 2001. The issues raised there were also discussed, among others, in Edward Herman and David Petersen, 'Who Terrorizes Whom?', *Zmag.org*, October 2001.

<sup>3</sup> See my 'The Moment of Global Support', *Socialist Alliance*, 30 September, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See William Blum, 'Civilian Casualties: Theirs and Ours', *Counterpunch*, December 17, 2001 (text at <http://www.counterpunch.org/blumcasualties.html>), for figures of civilian casualties in the Afghan war. See A. C. Thomson, 'War Without End', *The Nation* (USA), December 2, 2001, for environmental destruction of Afghanistan. See <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounders/arms/cluster-bck1031.html> for a Human Rights Watch report on the types and effects of bombs used in the Afghan war.

<sup>5</sup> See 'April 28 More Sinister Than April 27', RAWA statement on the occasion of its demonstration on April 28, 2002, *Zmag.org*, May 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See Debesh Roy, 'Constructing the Future of Afghanistan', Originally published in the Bengali daily *Aajkaal*, Calcutta, November 30. English translation in *SACW* #1, 10 December, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> See my 'Recent Assembly Elections in India', *SACW*, 23 May, 2001.

<sup>8</sup> See S. Guha Ray, 'James Baker quietly lobbies India: Secret visit to gain support for Iraq attack, partner for oil', *WorldNetDaily.com.*, April 15, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'Interview with David Barsamian', Amherst, Boston, February 2001; see Znet interviews. This issue needs to be discussed with more care than is possible here. I am not suggesting, neither does Roy I believe, that CEOs themselves want a fundamentalist form of life. As Chomsky observed, corporate executives 'don't want to have their kids pray in school. They don't want to have religious fundamentalists tell them what to do. They want their wives and daughters to have opportunities, abortion rights and other forms of freedom' (*Class Warfare*, Pluto Press, 1966, p.7). Fundamentalism is to be seen as a form of mass-control, a strategy of manipulating beliefs with fear, hatred and a reverence for authority.

<sup>10</sup> Vaskar Nandy, 'War against terrorism: Perspective on Protests', *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 27, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> See my 'A Parliament Adjourned', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 29 December, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> See my, 'Manufacturing Peace', *SACW* #1, 3 January, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> See my, 'On Reasons for the State', *Indian Social Science Review*, Vol.1, No.2, 1999, p.311-327.

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